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Preparing a Child for First Communion

by

Sister Jean Marie Renfro

Reprint from Our Sunday Visitor
3-3-68

Printed in the U.S.A. by
OUR SUNDAY VISITOR INC.
Huntington, Indiana 46750



THE primary and all important quality a child needs to receive the Eucharist is a living faith in the persons of God.

While knowledge aids the growth of faith, much more than knowledge is necessary. Because a normal healthy six-year-old child can be taught any number of facts in a short time, some presume the best way to prepare him to meet the Lord Jesus is to explain to him in several lessons the basic teachings of the Church. This is simply not so.

Making a child ready for his Lord is a long term process, beginning when he is baptized. It is a process in which parents and teachers collaborate with God the Holy Spirit to lead the child to his Father. Facts can be acquired in a few lessons, at home or at school. But to plant the seeds of a deep life of faith, to nourish these seeds, to put no obstacle in the way of God who causes them to grow, this is another matter, and it begins at home.

Receiving the Eucharist is not a famous first in the child's life. Rather it is participating in a new way in the faith-life which he has been living for six or seven years. The official lessons he receives to make him ready for his First Communion will be understood in one of two ways. They will crystallize

in his mind what his parents have been teaching him by their lives, or, if his parents have not shown him how Christians live, they will be academic truths which will bounce right off his head. For me, it is not a question of *why* parents should prepare their children for the Eucharist. It is simply a fact that they *do* prepare them—by their attitudes toward one another, toward the children, toward other people and toward the Persons in God.

A Christian is a person who, because of his relationship to the Father freely bases his everyday decisions on love and consideration for others. Parents prepare their children for Christian living by living as Christians themselves. The central teaching of Christianity is love. Love is the only definition of God given us in sacred scripture. In his home a child learns to give and receive love, or he senses the absence of something vital. Christianity is a way of thinking about, listening to, speaking to, acting toward Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and all the human persons one contacts. When children are very young they absorb their parents' attitudes toward others—toward the other who is attractive and buoyant and charming, as well as toward the other who is different or difficult or disgusting in some way—

and this other is the brother for whom Christ died. Attitudes of love or hate, trust or distrust, justice or injustice are caught by small children long before they can be officially taught. By the time the child enters first grade he already has a set of values. Learning to love God and one another is not a matter of six lessons, but the stuff of which daily living is made.

What to Do

But, specifically, what do parents do when the pastor says, "Prepare your child for his first Communion." First they keep in mind that a six-year-old is not an adult and does not need to know everything there is to know. His first Communion will not be his last. Then they try to be alert to every opportunity which life offers to speak to their child.

We have a Father who loves us, Who cares about each of us as individuals. We have a Father who made us simply because He loves, a Father who loves us not because we are good — sometimes we aren't—but one who loves us because He is good. God our Father has made everything. He expects us to work with His creation, to make of the raw materials He gives new and better things so that everyone may live a happier life. He expects us to find joy in

His creation and to return praise and thanksgiving to Him. We have a Father whose greatest gift of love is His own Son.

About the Lord Jesus

Generally Catholic parents have no trouble seeing Christ Jesus as divine, but to speak adequately of Him parents must also see Him as the man who walks through the Gospel accounts, the man who gets his hands dirty with work, the man who finds no difficulty reaching out to the least of his society, the man who finds no one too lowly for his compassion and care, the man who simply offers himself in service to others. This Jesus, Who is one of us, Who is our brother, is God the Son. His greatest service to us consists in His always saying yes to His Father, even to accepting a disgraceful death in order to break the power evil had over man. Jesus passed through death to new life and is living right now. He did not stop being man, therefore, He is living in a human way, a new and perfect human way of living which we will share one day with Him.

When Jesus came to live among us He spent His whole life listening to the Holy Spirit Who filled Him. At every moment the Spirit guided Him, aided Him, strengthened Him. On the night

before He died Jesus ate a special supper with His apostles. He gave Himself to us in the Living Bread and promised His Holy Spirit to all who would believe in Him. We received the Spirit at the time of our baptism. He lives in us, is active in us right this minute. It is because the Spirit is at work in us that we can pray. Without Him we cannot even know that God is our Father. Without Him we could not live in a way which pleases the Father.

About Sin and Forgiveness

The Father calls us in love. He asks us to show love for Him by the love we show to others, but He has made us free and we can say no if we choose. If we say no, and are unloving toward others, the Father goes right on loving us. He calls us to be sorry, to ask forgiveness. He forgives and He expects us to forgive others.

Prayer is listening to the voice of the Father Who speaks to us in many ways. We can pray because the Spirit lives in us. It is He who enables us to hear and to speak to our Father. We listen and we speak in our own words and in the words of the Church.

We go to Mass because we want to join the other people of God in worshipping the Father. At Mass we quietly and carefully listen to the Word of God

so that our lives may be made beautiful by Him. At Mass, with Jesus we remember we belong to the Father. We give ourselves to Him. We receive Jesus Himself when we eat the Living Bread, and we are united to the Lord and to all the people of God. We grow strong and loving; we can care for the needs of others.

How to Prepare

How to do all of this? What if one is not prepared? One can become prepared by prayer and thoughtful study, especially by careful reading of sacred scripture. Parents and teachers need to work together. As the child goes through grade one in parochial school or CCD school of religion his attitudes of love and his knowledge of God should grow. Parents would do well to be very familiar with the lessons being taught in school, to discuss them with their child. A copy of the teacher's manual would be helpful, not to teach the material at home, but to understand the approach being used in class. Discuss the scripture passages, talk about the illustrations, find out what the child is thinking, what the formal lessons in religion mean to him. But first, last and always use the informal opportunities for teaching Christian truth, for these are the lessons the child will remember best. ■